



7-31-2001

Brigham Young and the Book of Mormon

W. Jeffrey Marsh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Marsh, W. Jeffrey (2001) "Brigham Young and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 10 : No. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol10/iss2/3>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Brigham Young and the Book of Mormon

Author(s) W. Jeffrey Marsh

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 6-15, 69.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Brigham Young studied the text of the Book of Mormon for approximately two years before he decided to be baptized. This article discusses how his family life prepared him to receive the teachings of the Book of Mormon and the influence his testimony had on him throughout his life, as second president of the church, and as the first governor of the state of Utah. Despite his conversion to the Book of Mormon, Brigham did not often refer to its teachings in his sermons. This seemingly strange practice was likely a result of the cultural dependence on the Bible at that time and of Brigham's careful attention to the prophet Joseph Smith Jr.'s teaching style, which did not include a large number of Book of Mormon references. Even though Brigham did not incorporate direct references in his teachings, he was greatly influenced by the principles taught in the Book of Mormon.

Brigham Young, by Enoch W. Perry. Oil on canvas, 1866. Photograph by Ron Read. Courtesy, Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City, Utah. From the Salt Lake City and County Collection. Used by permission.



Brigham Young

AND THE

BOOK OF MORMON

W. JEFFREY MARSH

A HEROIC-SIZE BRONZE STATUE OF BRIGHAM YOUNG STANDS IN THE ROTUNDA OF THE UTAH STATE CAPITOL BUILDING, AND A LIFE-SIZE MARBLE MONUMENT OF HIM IN THE NATIONAL STATUARY HALL IN WASHINGTON, D.C., FURTHER PROCLAIMS HIS EMINENCE AS A MAN OF ACTION AND INDOMITABLE WILL. INDEED, BRIGHAM YOUNG WAS A REMARKABLE LEADER WITH THE “VISION TO SEE AND FAITH TO DO, NO MATTER HOW GREAT THE TASK OR HOW DIFFICULT THE OBSTACLE.”¹ HE IS RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE ABLEST LEADERS IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND PERHAPS “ONE OF THE FOREMOST COLONIZERS AND EMPIRE BUILDERS” IN THE HISTORY OF MANKIND.²

As president and prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for three decades, President Young was also a deeply spiritual man. Indeed, “much more than being a colonizer and a governor, [he] was a seer and a profound teacher of gospel doctrines and principles. The more one encounters his key teachings, the larger he looms.”³ Curiously, however, his published sermons as a whole contain relatively few citations from the Book of Mormon—the marvelous scriptural record that had come to light in his day and led him into the church he would embrace for the rest of his life. Yet Brigham’s acquaintance with that book was such that it formed one of the pillars on which he rested some of his most important teachings. How important was the Book of Mormon to Brigham Young? What impact did it have on his life and teachings? And what impact did he, in turn, have on the printing and dissemination of the Book of Mormon?

An Early Love for God’s Word

Brigham Young was the ninth of eleven children born to John and Abigail Nabby Howe Young. Despite failing health that cut her life short, Abigail instilled in her family great faith in God to the extent that each of her children, “on hearing the Gospel, accepted it with whole heart.”⁴ She taught her children to love the Bible. Brigham said, “Of my mother—she that bore me—I can say, no better woman ever lived in the world than she was. . . . My mother, while she lived, taught her children all the time to honour the name of the Father and Son, and to reverence the holy Book. She said, ‘Read it, observe its precepts, and apply them to your lives as far as you can.’”⁵

From early youth, Brigham yearned for spiritual enlightenment. He found life less than satisfying, was pessimistic about the future, and took no comfort in the philosophies espoused in his day. He often prayed,

“If there is a God in heaven save me, that I may know all and not be fooled. I saw them get religion all around me—men were rolling and hollering and bawling and thumping but [it] had no effect on me. I wanted to know the truth that I might not be fooled.”⁶

He desired to possess the same spiritual gifts and spiritual understanding described in the New Testament. “The secret feeling of my heart,” he wrote, “was that I would be willing to crawl around the earth on my hands and knees, to see such a man as was Peter, Jeremiah, Moses, or any man that could tell me anything about God and heaven.”⁷ When it came to teaching the things of God, Brigham felt that the religious philosophies of his day were “as dark as midnight.”⁸

Although Brigham was very discouraged about the general condition of mankind, his brother Phinehas recalled giving him this choice counsel in 1829: “Hang on, [Brigham], for I know the Lord is agoing to do something for us.”⁹

Brigham became even more determined to find the truth. A hunger and thirst for the things of the Spirit were an intrinsic part of his nature. He had unwavering faith in a living God, and as a seeker, he soon discovered in the restoration of the gospel and in the Book of Mormon what his heart longed to know.

A Remarkable Sign in Heaven

Brigham married Miriam Angeline Works on 5 October 1824. They mutually agreed to attend the Methodist church. The Youngs settled first in Haydenville and later moved to Port Byron, New York (both homes are still standing).

On the night of 21 September 1827—when Joseph Smith received the Book of Mormon record from the angel Moroni at the hill Cumorah—Brigham and Miriam witnessed a remarkable heavenly manifestation in Port Byron, 55 miles east of Cumorah. Simultaneously, the same heavenly display was seen

in Mendon (20 miles south of Cumorah) by Brigham's sister Rhoda and her husband, John P. Greene, as well as by Heber C. and Vilate Kimball. None of them had yet met the Smiths, and none were aware of the restoration of the gospel then under way, but all of them watched that night as a heavenly vision unfolded of a great army marching in perfect unison from the east to the west until it filled the surrounding horizon. Heber C. Kimball exclaimed: "No man could judge of my feelings when I beheld that army of men, as plainly as ever I saw armies of men in the flesh; it seemed as though every hair of my head was alive. This scenery we gazed upon for hours, until it began to disappear."¹⁰ God, it seems, was marshaling his forces on earth, and Brigham Young would be a key player in the dramatic events about to transpire.

The following year, while Joseph Smith was engaged in translating the Book of Mormon, Brigham and his family moved to Mendon to live on his father's farm. Their neighbors included the Kimballs and the Greenes.

Conversion through the Book of Mormon

Brigham was first introduced to the Book of Mormon while in Mendon in the spring of 1830. Samuel Smith, brother to the Prophet Joseph, tracted through the area with a knapsack of the newly printed scripture. Two of these copies made their way into the hands of Brigham's siblings and began to circulate through the family. The first copy was presented to his brother Phinehas at the Tomlinson Inn in Mendon. Samuel entered the tavern, where hotel guests and stagecoach travelers were dining, and approached Phinehas, who had stopped there for supper. While holding out a copy of the Book of Mormon, Samuel simply said, "There's a book, sir, I wish you to read." He described its contents and said, "I know the book is a revelation from God, translated by the power of the Holy Ghost, and that my brother, Joseph Smith, Jr., is a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator."¹¹

That single, quiet conversation initiated a chain reaction of events leading to the conversion of several future leaders of the church. The Youngs had heard rumors about Joseph Smith's golden Bible and knew something about it,¹² but this was the first time any of them had actually seen the book. Phinehas said, "I commenced and read every word in the book the same week. The week following I did the same, but to my surprise, I could not find the errors I anticipated, but felt a conviction that the book was true."¹³

Phinehas loaned the book to his father and to his sister Fanny. She declared the book to be "a revelation." After father Young read the book, he said it was "the greatest work . . . he had ever seen, the Bible not excepted." Apparently, Brigham also read from the book but wanted more time to study the matter.¹⁴

A few months later, in June 1830, Samuel Smith returned to the Mendon area and loaned a second copy of the Book of Mormon to Brigham's brother-in-law John P. Greene, a Methodist preacher. This second copy also circulated among family members.

In August 1830 Phinehas and his brother Joseph were on their way to preach Reformed Methodism in Canada. At one point in their journey, they were entertained in the home of Solomon Chamberlain, a former Reformed Methodist who had been baptized a Latter-day Saint in Seneca Lake by the Prophet Joseph Smith in April. Solomon preached to Joseph and Phinehas from the Book of Mormon for almost two hours. Overwhelmed by Solomon's enthusiasm for the book, Phinehas protested, saying it was "not good to give a colt a bushel of oats at a time," but Solomon did not desist.¹⁵ Phinehas was moved by Solomon's sincere declaration that "everyone must believe in the Book of Mormon or be lost."¹⁶ He later wrote: "This was the first I had heard of the necessity of another church, or of the importance of rebaptism; but after hearing the old gentleman's arguments, . . . I began to inquire seriously into the matter, and soon became convinced that such an order of things was necessary for the salvation of the world."¹⁷ Naturally, Brigham heard reports of his brothers' experience. He remarked to Phinehas that he was convinced there was something to Mormonism. Phinehas replied that he "had long been satisfied of that."¹⁸

Brigham later accompanied Phinehas to a conference of the Reformed Methodists at Manlius Center in Onondaga County, New York. There they listened to Solomon Chamberlain preach about the Book of Mormon. Although Solomon's message was not well received by those at the conference, Brigham's soul was stirred. Yet he proceeded cautiously. "When the [B]ook of Mormon was first printed, it came to my hands in two or three weeks afterwards. Did I believe, on the first intimation of it? . . . 'Hold on,' says I. . . . 'Wait a little while; what is the doctrine of the book, and of the revelations the Lord has given? Let me apply my heart to them. . . . I considered it to be my right to know for myself, as much as any man on earth. I examined the matter studiously for two years

before I made up my mind to receive that book. . . . I wished time sufficient to prove all things for myself.”¹⁹ He later recalled, “I was not baptized on hearing the first sermon, nor the second, nor during the first year of my acquaintance with this work.”²⁰

Besides studying the Book of Mormon, Brigham wanted to learn the character of those who professed to believe in it: “I watched to see whether good common sense was manifest; and if they had that, I wanted them to present it in accordance with the Scriptures. . . . [W]hen I had ripened everything in my mind, I drank it in, and not till then.”²¹

For the next 18 months he pondered the Book of Mormon and its message. In the fall of 1831, Elders Alpheus Gifford and Eleazar Miller, along with other missionaries, came from Pennsylvania through Mendon to preach the Book of Mormon. Upon hearing them, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball were, in Heber’s words, “constrained by the Spirit to bear testimony of the truth which we had heard, and when we did this, the power of God rested upon us and we had a testimony that the work was true.” Brigham simply noted that they were taught “the everlasting Gospel as revealed to Joseph Smith,” which gospel, he said, “I heard and believed.”²²

The missionaries returned to the area in 1832, and Brigham’s extended family made two visits to hear them at the Columbia Branch in Pennsylvania. Brigham described the impact of Elder Miller’s humble manner and firm testimony of the Book of Mormon: “If all the talent, tact, wisdom, and refinement of the world had been sent to me with the Book of Mormon, and had declared, in the most exalted of earthly eloquence, the truth of it, undertaking to prove it by learning and worldly wisdom, they would have been to me like the smoke which arises only to vanish away. But when I saw a man without eloquence, or talents for public speaking, who could only say, ‘I know, by the power of the Holy Ghost, that the Book of Mormon is true, that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of the Lord,’ the Holy Ghost proceeding from that individual illuminated my understanding, and light, glory, and immortality were before me. I was encircled by them, filled with them, and I knew for myself that the testimony of the man was true. . . . My own judgment, natural endowments, and education bowed to this simple, but mighty testimony.”²³

On Sunday, 15 April 1832, after two years of intensive investigation, Brigham was baptized in his own

millstream at Mendon and confirmed at the water’s edge by Elder Eleazar Miller. All of his immediate family—father, brothers, and sisters—were also baptized. “It is a remarkable fact,” historian Leonard J. Arrington noted, “that . . . all [of the Young family members baptized that day] remained loyal, practicing Mormons throughout their lives.”²⁴

Brigham said that on that occasion he felt a humble, childlike spirit witness to him that his sins were forgiven. He was filled with enthusiasm and a sincere desire to share what he now possessed. In the week following his baptism, he delivered his first sermon. He later said, “I wanted to thunder and roar out the Gospel to the nations. It burned in my bones like fire pent up, so I [commenced] to preach. . . . Nothing would satisfy me but to cry abroad in the world, what the Lord was doing in the latter days.”²⁵ Although he would be driven from five homes because of his testimony (homes in which he barely had time to settle before being forced to leave—losing “everything [he] had” each time²⁶), he spent the remainder of his life declaring what he knew to be true.

Unswayed by Opposition to the Book of Mormon

On one occasion before they joined the church, Heber, Brigham, and Brigham’s brother Joseph were discussing what they had learned from the elders and their own reading of the Book of Mormon. As they were talking, they suddenly “felt the glory of God around them and saw in vision ‘the gathering of the Saints to Zion, and the glory that would rest upon them; and many more things connected with that great event, such as the sufferings and persecutions which would come upon the people of God, and the calamities and judgments which would come upon the world.’”²⁷

Reflecting on this experience years later, Brigham observed that the source of the opposition leveled against the Book of Mormon was from the adversary. A great many false stories and reports were circulated “as quick as the Book of Mormon was printed, and began to be scattered abroad,” he said. “Then the spirit of persecution, the spirit of death, the spirit of destruction immediately seemed to enter the hearts” of various individuals, more particularly in “the hearts of the pious priests . . . than any other portion of the people [because] they could not bear it.”²⁸ Despite the opposition and rising resistance to the Book of Mormon, Brigham was deeply impressed with the biblical style of the book and the answers

it gave to the questions of life and the afterlife—questions that had vexed him from his youth. He viewed its teachings to be of “priceless value.”²⁹

Declaring the Word

Once converted to Mormonism, Brigham proclaimed and defended the Book of Mormon. On his first mission to the Eastern states, he experienced a hostile encounter with a Boston minister. Brigham found the best solution to the problem was to share his testimony of the Book of Mormon. He wrote, “We bore testimony of the Book of Mormon and drowned him in his own words and let him go.”³⁰

Brigham was fearless in his declaration of the Book of Mormon as the word of God. He occasionally referred to the large number of witnesses it had: “How many witnesses has the Book of Mormon? Hundreds and thousands are now living upon the earth, who testify to its truth.”³¹ On one of his missionary travels, he listened to several religious leaders attempt to prove that everyone ought to believe in the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ because of the miracles he performed that were recorded in the New Testament. Using their same logic, Brigham observed that if eight New Testament authors, “who have been dead for about seventeen hundred years,” were enough to establish the divinity of the Savior, then the twelve living witnesses who testified that they saw and handled the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated should be enough to convince the world that the Book of Mormon is true.³²

Brigham further testified that every person could become a personal witness of the Book of Mormon by receiving his or her own spiritual confirmation of the truth: “Here is the Book of Mormon. . . . In that book we learn that Jesus visited this continent, delivered his Gospel and ordained Twelve Apostles. We believe all this, but we do not ask you to believe it. What we do ask is that you will believe what is recorded in the Holy Bible concerning God and His revelations to the children of men. Do this in all honesty and sincerity, then you will know that the Book of Mormon is true. Your minds will be opened and you will know by . . . the Spirit of God that we teach the truth.”³³

Reliance on the Bible and on the Living Prophet

As noted earlier, although the Book of Mormon played a pivotal role in Brigham Young’s conversion and testimony, it was never a focus of his published

sermons. This fact may puzzle modern readers familiar with the book’s prominent role in the church today and with Brigham’s conversion by the Spirit. Two observations help shed light on this question.

First, Brigham was not alone in basing his doctrinal teachings more on the Bible than on the Book of Mormon. His generation grew up in a culture that highly valued the Bible and looked to it for doctrinal standards and solutions to problems. Brigham himself once remarked: “In all my teachings, I have taught the Gospel from the Old and New Testaments. I found therein every doctrine, and the proof of every doctrine, the Latter-day Saints believe in, as far as I know, therefore *I do not refer to the Book of Mormon as often as I otherwise should*. There may be some doctrines about which little is said in the Bible, but they are all couched therein, and I believe the doctrines because they are true, and I have taught them because they are calculated to save the children of men.”³⁴

In general, that statement reflected the mindset of probably all church members in Brigham’s generation. This underutilization of the Book of Mormon brought a rebuke from the Lord: “Your minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have treated lightly the things you have received—which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation. And this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all. *And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, but to do according to that which I have written*—that they may bring forth fruit meet for their Father’s kingdom; otherwise there remaineth a scourge and judgment to be poured out upon the children of Zion” (D&C 84:54–58; emphasis added).

As several Book of Mormon scholars have noted, “Early LDS converts were students of the Bible, and with no traditions concerning the Book of Mormon, they did not readily incorporate the new scripture into their devotions.”³⁵ The Book of Mormon was valued as a conversion tool and as evidence of the restoration of the gospel, yet “writings in the early years of the Church contain remarkably few references to the Book of Mormon. . . . Many early Mormon converts were steeped in the study of the Bible but had not ‘opportunity for formal instruction or catechization in the Book of Mormon.’ Although the existence and truthfulness of the Book of Mormon

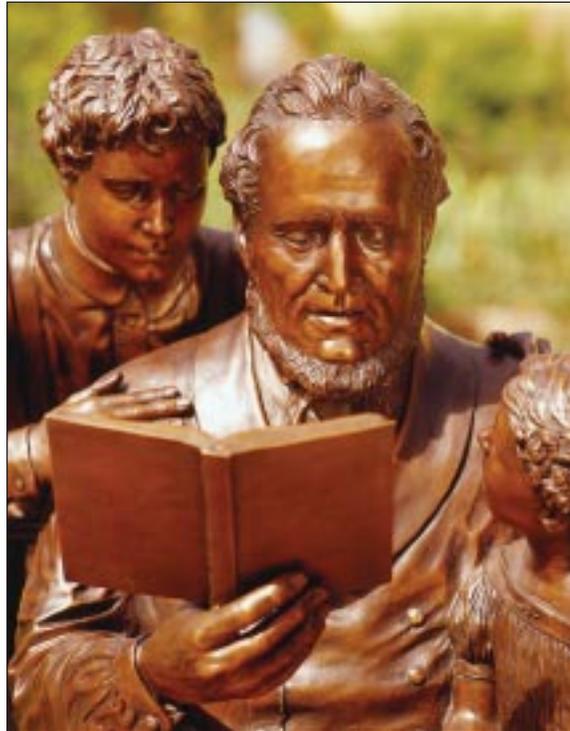
were crucial points of faith and touchstones of conversion for the early Saints, it would take time and effort for the contents of that distinctive volume to come into widespread use.³⁶ It was primarily during the latter part of President Young's administration, when Elder Orson Pratt was called to prepare a new edition of the scriptures, that more careful attention was given to the Book of Mormon.³⁷

Another possible reason why Brigham Young cited the Book of Mormon infrequently in his sermons was that he patterned his teachings after those of the Prophet Joseph Smith.³⁸ "An angel never watched him closer than I did," Brigham declared, "and that is what has given me the knowledge I have today."³⁹ "From the first time I saw the Prophet Joseph I never lost a word that came from him concerning the kingdom. And this is the key of knowledge that I have." As Joseph Smith rarely cited the Book of Mormon in his own sermons,⁴⁰ it would seem natural that Brigham would teach the way he was mentored.

A Source of Inspiration and Ideas

Although in the early days of the restored church the Book of Mormon was not utilized in sermonizing as fully as it might have been, it remained a key scriptural witness in matters of faith, conversion, and theology, as it is today. In fact, Brigham Young declared it to be one of four main anchors to his faith—alongside the Bible, the teachings of Joseph Smith, and revelation to the living oracles.⁴² It seems reasonable to surmise, then, that the Book of Mormon influenced his doctrinal understanding and overall thought and action to a greater extent than can be discovered by scanning his sermons for direct quotations or other overt indicators of his reliance on that scripture.

Yet careful examination of those teachings does yield a delicate but discernible picture of his dependence on the Book of Mormon for certain of his ideas. To be sure, the Book of Mormon was not his only or, at times, even his main source of inspiration for his teachings, for he considered "living" inspiration to be preeminently important. That said, the Book of Mormon still offers a fruitful avenue for gaining access to the man and his thought, as the following sampling of insightful comments illustrates.



This statue of President Young, by Stan Watts, reminds us of his anxiety that his people should read and study "the best books" (D&C 88:118). Photograph by Bradley H. Slade.

Establishment of America essential to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Having been among those driven from one state to another and eventually exiled from the country,⁴³ President Young knew firsthand the ill treatment the Latter-day Saints had received in the United States. But he also knew that America's government had been inspired of God in preparation for the restoration and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: "Could that book [the Book of Mormon] have been brought forth and published to the world under any other government but the Government of the United States? No."⁴⁴

Brigham understood that, as prophesied, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was a signal to the world that the restoration of Israel had

begun (see 3 Nephi 21:1–7): "The Lord has been operating for centuries to prepare the way for the coming forth of the contents of that book [the Book of Mormon] from the bowels of the earth, to be published to the world, to show to the inhabitants thereof that he still lives, and that he will, in the latter days, gather his elect from the four corners of the earth. . . . The Lord has dictated and directed the whole of this, for the bringing forth, and establishing of his Kingdom in the last days."⁴⁵

The Book of Mormon testifies of the divinity of the Son of God. Brigham knew that the greatest worth of the scriptures, including the Book of Mormon, is

their power to lead souls to Christ. He observed that the books “Joseph has given us . . . are of great worth to a person wandering in darkness. They are like a lighthouse in the ocean, or a finger-post which points out the road we should travel. Where do they point? To the Fountain of light. . . . By them we can establish the doctrine of Christ.”⁴⁶

Losing the light. The Book of Mormon teaches that the hearts and minds of people once enlightened by the Spirit of God can become hardened and darkened through transgression (see Mosiah 2:36–37; Alma 9:23, 30). Brigham fully understood that a spiritual witness of the Book of Mormon could be lost in this way, leading one to doubt the book’s divine authenticity: “When men lose the spirit of the work in which we are engaged, they become infidel in their feelings. They say that they do not know whether the Bible is true, whether the Book of Mormon is true, nor about new revelations, nor whether there is a God or not. When they lose the spirit of this work, they lose the knowledge of the things of God in time and in eternity.”⁴⁷ “[T]hey have become contracted in their understandings, they have become darkened in their minds, and everything has become a mystery to them, and in regard to the things of God.”⁴⁸

Brigham once related the example of Oliver Cowdery, one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon: “What did Oliver . . . say, after he had been away from the Church years and years? He saw and conversed with the angels, who showed him the plates, and he handled them. He left the Church because he lost the love of truth; and after he had traveled alone for years, a gentleman walked into his law office and said to him, ‘Mr. Cowdery, what do you think of the Book of Mormon now? Do you believe that it is true?’ He replied, ‘No, sir, I do not!’ ‘Well,’ said the gentleman, ‘I thought as much; for I concluded that you had seen the folly of your ways and had resolved to renounce what you once declared to be true.’ ‘Sir, you mistake me; I do not believe that the Book of Mormon is true; I am past belief on that point, for I know that it is true, as well as I know that you now sit before me.’ ‘Do you still testify that you saw an angel?’ ‘Yes, as much as I see you now; and I know the Book of Mormon to be true.’ Yet he forsook it. Every honest person who has fairly heard it knows that ‘Mormonism’ is true, if they have had the testimony of it; but to practise it in our lives is another thing.”⁴⁹

The Book of Mormon bears witness of the Bible. Brigham Young had a firm testimony of the Bible,⁵⁰

but he did not believe that the Bible contained all of God’s words to all people of all times.⁵¹ He testified that the restored scriptures were in complete harmony with the Bible: “There is no clash in the principles revealed in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants.”⁵² He also declared that the Book of Mormon bears witness of the Bible: “It proves that the Bible is true. What does the infidel world say about the Bible? They say that the Bible is nothing better than last year’s almanac; it is nothing but a fable and priestcraft, and it is good for nothing. The Book of Mormon, however, declares that the Bible is true, and it proves it; and the two prove each other true.”⁵³

Brigham taught that these two records were divinely intertwined: “No man can say that this book (laying his hand on the Bible) is true, is the word of the Lord, is the way, is the guide-board in the path, and a charter by which we may learn the will of God; and at the same time say, that the Book of Mormon is untrue. . . . If one be true, both are; and if one be false, both are false. If Jesus lives, and is the Saviour of the world, Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God. . . . This is my testimony, and it is strong.”⁵⁴

Native Americans are of the house of Israel. President Young’s understanding of the Book of Mormon had an immense impact on his dealings with Native Americans, for it teaches that some Native Americans, whose ancestors’ history is outlined in that record, are a fallen race, a remnant of scattered Israel. Perhaps no one else believed as strongly as Brigham Young that Native American descendants of Israel had a glorious future according to prophecy. He called them “a people of destiny” and charged the Saints to treat them accordingly in all their dealings.⁵⁵ To be certain, this belief fueled Latter-day Saint missionary work among Native Americans as well as efforts to assist them.

The state of Deseret. Just two years after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, President Young organized a political convention on 4 March 1849, at which time a committee was appointed to draft a constitution for a new provisional state government. Brigham named the new territory “Deseret,” a Book of Mormon term for honeybee, signifying unity, industry, and cooperation (see Ether 2:3). He used the beehive motif extensively during his presidency (e.g., it appears on the capstone of the “Beehive House,” his official residence and office in Salt Lake City).

Sermons Drawn from the Book of Mormon

Brigham Young not only discussed the Book of Mormon in general terms, but he also drew on its teachings to deliver powerful sermons to the Saints. He was an “even-keeled, no-nonsense realist who got things done,”⁵⁶ and his sermons were filled with sound doctrine based on the Bible, the Doctrine and Covenants, statements of Joseph Smith, and to a lesser extent the Book of Mormon. The inspired discourses of Brigham Young deepened the doctrinal understanding of church members and awakened in them a deeper desire to know the things of God, yet his counsel was practical and ever applicable. A representative sampling of his teachings from the Book of Mormon follows.

Law of opposition. Brigham understood perfectly the necessity of opposition in life. He referred to 2 Nephi 2:11 and 15 (“it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things”) to teach this eternal truth: “Neither you nor I would ever be prepared to be crowned in the celestial kingdom of our Father and our God, without devils in this world. Do you know that the Saints never could be prepared to receive the glory that is in reserve for them, without devils to help them to get it? . . . Some of you may think that this is a curious principle, but it is true. Refer to the Book of Mormon, and you will find that Nephi and others taught that we actually need evil, in order to make this a state of probation. We must know the evil in order to know the good. There must needs be an opposition in all things. . . . This is a true principle.”⁵⁷

Brigham Young noted that this law of opposition even applied to the rise and progress of the church. He observed that “the powers of darkness, the powers of the enemies of all righteousness, were leveled against the few who believed in the Book of Mormon, and who believed that Joseph Smith was a Prophet.”⁵⁸

He understood that the reason for this persecution was rooted in the premortal war in heaven, that opposition to the Lord’s work in this life was but a continuation of that conflict, and that the Book of Mormon is at the heart of the matter: “One-third part of the spirits that were prepared for this earth rebelled against Jesus Christ, and were cast down to the earth, and they have been opposed to him from that day to this, with Lucifer at their head. He is their great General. . . . Do you not think that those spirits knew when Joseph Smith got the plates? Yes, just as well as you know that I am talking to you now. They were there at the time, and millions and millions of them

opposed Joseph in getting the plates; and not only they opposed him, but also men in the flesh.”⁵⁹ He further explained: “Just as soon as the Book of Mormon was declared to the people . . . and the set time had come for the Lord to favor Zion and gather Israel[,] at that very time, on that very day, the powers of darkness were arrayed against the Prophet, against the Book of Mormon, and those who believed it to be what it purported to be.”⁶⁰

Despite this opposition—much of which he had personally experienced—Brigham understood that all attempts to prevent the Book of Mormon from going forward would be futile: “Those spirits driven from heaven . . . and others . . . tried to prevent Joseph’s getting the plates. . . . From that day to this, [they] . . . have been trying to put down this work. But what have they gained? I should suppose that they would have stopped their operations long ere this, after uniformly meeting with such bad success.”⁶¹

The fall of man is not shameful. In Brigham’s teachings and in the Book of Mormon (see 2 Nephi 2:22–26), Adam was not the degenerate reprobate that some Christian thinkers portray him to be. Brigham taught the doctrine known in theology as “the fortunate fall.” The Book of Mormon declares that “Adam fell that man might be; and men are that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25) and that there “must needs be . . . an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11) or else progression would not be possible. Similarly, Brigham taught that the fall was a blessing to mankind and that through the opposition resulting from it Adam and all mankind experience “the very means of adding . . . knowledge, understanding, power, and glory, and prepar[ing themselves] to receive crowns, kingdoms, thrones, and principalities, and to be crowned in glory with the Gods of eternity. Short of this, we can never receive that which we are looking for.”⁶²

“Ask yourselves,” he said in the same sermon, “whether you think this people would have received as much as they have received, if they never had been persecuted. Could they have advanced in the school of intelligence as far without being persecuted, as they have by being persecuted? . . . How can you know truth but by its opposite, or light but by its opposite? The absence of light is darkness. How can sweetness be known but by its opposite, bitter? It is by this means that we obtain all intelligence.”⁶³

Implicit trust in God. Among Brigham Young’s favorite themes from the Book of Mormon was his

frequent counsel to submit our will to the will of God, regardless of how great the sacrifice. In an obvious reference to passages in Mosiah (see 3:19; 15:7; 24:15), he declared, “Wherever the wisdom of God directs, let our affections and the labour of our lives be centred to that point, and not set our hearts on going east or west, north or south, on living here or there, on possessing this or that; but *let our will be swallowed up in the will of God*, allowing him to rule supremely within us until the spirit overcomes the flesh.”⁶⁴

Brigham Young’s Impact on the Book of Mormon

As president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young was personally involved with publishing successive editions of the Book of Mormon in England and Nauvoo. Presiding over the church in Great Britain from 1839 to 1841, he directed the printing of selections from the Book of Mormon in the *Millennial Star*, the first time that portions of the book were printed in Europe. With much effort he also raised the funds necessary to print 5,000 copies of the entire book in February 1841.

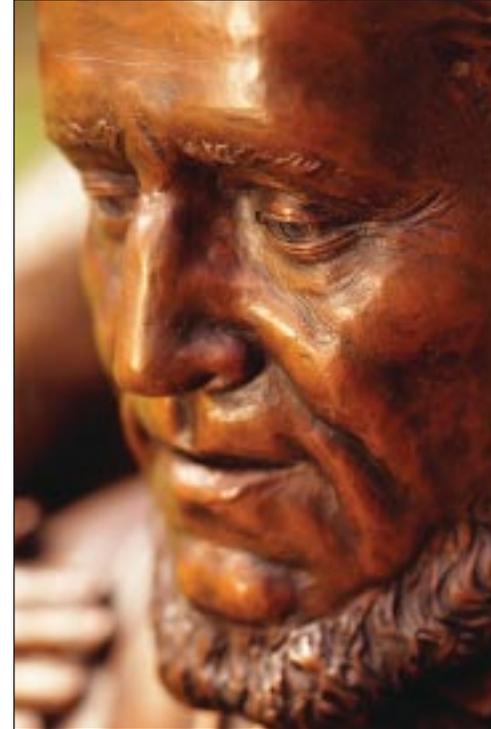
“I had not even an overcoat,” he recalled. “I took a small quilt from the trundle bed, and that served for my overcoat. . . . Thus we went to England, to a strange land to sojourn among strangers. . . . Most of us were entirely destitute of means to buy even any necessary article. . . . [Yet] we printed three thousand Hymn Books, and five thousand Books of Mormon, and issued two thousand *Millennial Stars* monthly, and in the course of the summer printed and gave away rising of sixty thousand tracts.”⁶⁵ Their efforts eventually resulted in the conversion of thousands in the British Isles. Later, in 1844, Brigham arranged for two ornately bound copies of the Book of Mormon to be presented to Queen Victoria.⁶⁶

When Brigham returned home, the Twelve were given responsibility for publishing a Nauvoo edition of the Book of Mormon in 1845. Later, as president of the church (1847–77), he oversaw the initial translation and printing of the Book of Mormon in Danish in 1851; in French, Welsh, German, and Italian in 1852; and in Hawaiian in 1855. He rejoiced when those translations appeared in print.⁶⁷ Moreover, a Hindustani translation was prepared in 1855 but not

published, a Deseret Alphabet version was completed in 1869, and selections from the Book of Mormon were published in Spanish in 1875.

In summary, Brigham Young’s testimony and conversion were largely a product of the Book of Mormon. Although he did not often refer to the book in his sermons, the undergirding principles he learned while studying it were always at the forefront of his teachings. His two-year period of pondering its precepts before he joined the church anchored his faith in Jesus Christ and in the restoration through the Prophet Joseph Smith. He recognized the book’s biblical style, discovered answers to life’s questions in its pages, found comfort in its teachings about the afterlife, and drew many practical lessons from the principles it contains. The Book of Mormon had a tremendous impact on his life, and he in turn had a great impact on its subsequent printings and wider distribution. His testimony and appreciation of the scriptures—including the Book of Mormon—were unwavering:

“The revelations contained in the Bible and the Book of Mormon are ensamples to us, and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants contains direct revelation to this Church; they are a guide to us, and we do not wish to do them away; we do not wish them to become obsolete and to set them aside. We wish to continue in the revelations of the Lord Jesus Christ day by day, and to have His Spirit with us continually. If we can do this, we shall no more walk in darkness, but we shall walk in the light of life.”⁶⁸ 



Detail of Brigham Young statue. Photograph by Bradley H. Slade.

ENDNOTES

Brigham Young and the Book of Mormon
W. Jeffrey Marsh

- Gordon B. Hinckley, cited in "Brigham Young 200th Birthday," official news release, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 24 May 2001.
- John A. Widtsoe, in *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), v.
- Neal A. Maxwell, "Brigham Young," *Heroes of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 219.
- S. Dilworth Young, "Great-Grandson Recounts Birth of Brigham Young," *Church News*, 29 May 1971, 4.
- Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 6:290.
- Brigham Young, as recorded in the minutes of a Young and Richards family meeting in Nauvoo, 8 January 1845. Family and Church History Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter Church Archives; cited in *Presidents of the Church: Religion 345* [Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979], 65).
- Journal of Discourses*, 8:228.
- Journal of Discourses*, 14:197–98.
- Phineas Young to Brigham Young, 11 August 1845, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives.
- To read the account of this miraculous manifestation, see Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, Collector's Edition (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 15–17. Brigham Young's account is in unpublished minutes of the Young-Richards family meeting, Nauvoo, 18 January 1845. See note 6 above.
- S. Dilworth Young, "Here Is Brigham . . .," *Brigham Young, the Years to 1844* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 51.
- See *Journal of Discourses*, 15:135; 5:55; see also Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 19.
- Cited in Leonard J. Arrington and JoAnn Jolley, "The Faithful Young Family: The Parents, Brothers, and Sisters of Brigham," *Ensign*, August 1980, 55.
- Manuscript History of Brigham Young: 1801–1844*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 1; cited in Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 438.
- Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, xix–xx; see Larry C. Porter, "Solomon Chamberlain—Early Missionary," *BYU Studies* 12 (spring 1973): 317.
- Cited in Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 27.
- Ibid.*
- See Miriam Maxfield, "A Compiled History of Phineas Howe Young," Church Archives.
- Journal of Discourses*, 3:91.
- Journal of Discourses*, 8:38.
- Ibid.*
- Ronald K. Esplin, "Conversion and Transformation: Brigham Young's New York Roots," in *Lion of the Lord—Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 35.
- Journal of Discourses*, 1:90.
- Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 20.
- Journal of Discourses*, 1:313.
- Journal of Discourses*, 7:205.
- Esplin, "Brigham Young's New York Roots," 35.
- Journal of Discourses*, 2:249.
- Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 28.
- Ibid.*, 55; spelling standardized.
- Journal of Discourses*, 10:326.
- Journal of Discourses*, 14:202–3; see 10:326.
- Journal of Discourses*, 13:335.
- Journal of Discourses*, 16:73–74; emphasis added.
- Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 7 (6–47); see Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (autumn 1984): 52–53, 59; and Grant Underwood, "The Earliest Reference Guides to the Book of Mormon: Windows into the Past," *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (1985): 83 (69–89).
- Reynolds, "Coming Forth," 8.
- See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 9, 13–14.
- Speaking of his regard for the words taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith, Brigham said, "Would he not take the Scriptures and make them so plain and simple that everybody could understand?" (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. Widtsoe, 459.) "I never did let an opportunity pass of getting with the Prophet Joseph and of hearing him speak in public or private, so that I might draw understanding from the fountain from which he spoke" (Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:269).
- The complete quotation reads: "An angel never watched him closer than I did, and that is what has given me the knowledge I have today. I treasure it up, and ask the Father, in the name of Jesus, to help my memory when information is wanted" (8 October 1866 sermon, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives).
- The complete quotation reads: "From the first time I saw the Prophet Joseph I never lost a word that came from him concerning the kingdom. And this is the key of knowledge that I have today, that I did hearken to the words of Joseph, and treasured them up in my heart, laid them away, asking my Father in the name of his Son Jesus to bring them to my mind when needed. . . . I was anxious to learn from Joseph and the spirit of God" (25 May 1877 discourse, *Deseret News*, 6 June 1877, 274).
- See *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Richard C. Galbraith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993). Note how few times Book of Mormon references, compared to other scriptural references, appear in the footnotes to the Prophet Joseph Smith's sermons.
- Journal of Discourses*, 9:297; 8:129.
- See *Journal of Discourses*, 11:17–18; 5:231–32.
- Journal of Discourses*, 8:67.
- Journal of Discourses*, 11:17.
- Journal of Discourses*, 8:129.
- Journal of Discourses*, 8:316.
- Journal of Discourses*, 16:65.
- Journal of Discourses*, 7:55.
- Brigham Young once declared, "We have a holy reverence for and belief in the Bible" (*Journal of Discourses*, 14:113), and further, "The doctrine we preach is the doctrine of the Bible, it is the doctrine the Lord has revealed for the salvation of the children of God" (*Journal of Discourses*, 14:200).
- Journal of Discourses*, 13:176.
- Journal of Discourses*, 5:329.
- Journal of Discourses*, 13:175.
- Journal of Discourses*, 1:38.
- Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 211.
- Hugh W. Nibley, as cited in "American Moses and Colonizer of the Western United States," official news release, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 24 May 2001.
- Journal of Discourses*, 4:373; see *Journal of Discourses*, 11:234–35.
- Journal of Discourses*, 2:248.
- Journal of Discourses*, 5:55; see Andrew H. Hedges, "All My Endeavors to Preserve Them: Protecting the Plates in Palmyra, 22 September–December 1827," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 14–23.
- Journal of Discourses*, 2:248–49.
- Journal of Discourses*, 5:55.
- See *Journal of Discourses*, 2:7.
- See *Journal of Discourses*, 2:6–7.
- Journal of Discourses*, 9:106; emphasis added.
- Journal of Discourses*, 4:35.
- See *History of the Church*, 6:181.
- Letters from Brigham Young to George Q. Cannon, 3 January 1856 and 3 April 1856, Brigham Young Letterbooks, box 13, folder 22, Brigham Young University Collection, Church Archives; cited in David J. Whittaker, "Brigham Young and the Missionary Enterprise," *Lion of the Lord—Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 93, 105 n. 11.
- Journal of Discourses*, 10:284–85.